



Ahimsā

Newsletter of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

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Being A Monk: A Conversation with Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff [1971])

BY RICH ORLOFF (1973)
PHOTOS BY JACQUIE LOWELL (1969)



Several years ago, while I was preparing for a trip to Southeast Asia — in part to learn about Buddhism — a friend suggested that I first contact Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the abbot of the Mettā Forest Monastery in northern San Diego County, California. Despite his imposing Thai name, this monk was actually raised in rural New York and Virginia under an equally imposing American name: Geoffrey Furguson DeGraff.

As an Oberlin student, Geoff was introduced to meditation during a winter-term seminar in 1969. He graduated in 1971, and then served as a Shansi representative in Thailand for two years. After returning there in 1976, he was ordained as a

monk and spent the next fifteen years immersed in the Forest monastery tradition of Theravādin Buddhism (see below). He returned to the United States in 1991 to establish the Mettā Forest Monastery, an American equivalent of the Thai Forest retreats.

Known informally as “Ajahn Geoff,” Thanissaro Bhikkhu has written several books on Buddhism and *vipassanā* (Insight) meditation. Fluent in Thai and Pāḷi, the languages of early Buddhist writings, he has translated the writings of two noted Thai abbots and several volumes of the

The Thai Forest Tradition, founded in the late 19th century, is known for its strict adherence to monastic discipline and its emphasis on the full-time practice of meditation. The tradition derives from the belief that the Buddha Himself gained awakening in a forest, delivered His first discourse in a forest, and passed away in a forest. The qualities of mind He developed to survive in the wild, both physically and mentally, were key to His teachings.

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Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- *Dhamma* study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original Teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the Teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the *Dhamma*, based primarily on Pāli sources.
2. To promote practice of the *Dhamma* in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the *Dhamma*, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pāli language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

Dhamma Study Groups

An on-going *Dhamma* study group focusing on the book *Just Seeing* by Cynthia Thatcher is meeting on irregular Sunday mornings at 11:00 AM at the home of Jason and Vanessa Widener (892 East Estates Blvd, West Ashley, SC 29414). E-mail info@charlestonbuddhistfellowship.org or call (843) 321-9190 for the date and time of the next meeting and for directions to Jason's home. The meeting schedule is also posted on the CBF web site: <http://www.charlestonbuddhistfellowship.org>. There is no fee to participate in this group. An introductory study group starts at 10:00 AM. ■

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Pāḷi Canon. In short, he knows his Buddhism.

Although I was anxious during our first phone call, Ajahn Geoff was relaxed and friendly. He started me on an exploration into Buddhism that I have both embraced and tried to avoid almost every day since. Over the years, we have had lengthy conversations about almost everything. But I still had countless questions for him — personal questions I suspected other people also would like to ask a monk. When I suggested an interview, Ajahn Geoff replied instantly, “Sounds like fun.” A few months later, on a warm September afternoon at his monastery, Ajahn Geoff and I began to talk.

You arrived at Oberlin as a freshman in 1967. I assume you chose Oberlin because you knew it would give you the best undergraduate training possible to become a Buddhist monk.

That was the last thing on my mind. As a junior in high school reading American history, I read how Oberlin was among the first coed and integrated colleges in the country, and that interested me. I also liked that it had classical music. I was a classical music fanatic.

Did Oberlin give you your first exposure to Buddhism?

No. In high school, I had been an American Friends Service (AFS) student in the Philippines. On the plane coming back home, I met two guys who had been to Thailand and been ordained as novices (a kind of apprentice monk). They explained the Four Noble Truths, the most fundamental teaching of the Buddha. It made a lot of sense to me. Also, my girlfriend’s father was a military man who had been stationed in Thailand. She had lots of stories to tell about Thailand as well. I was intrigued.

Did your interest grow at Oberlin?

During my sophomore year, during Oberlin’s very first winter term, Don Swearer, a professor of religion, brought in a monk from Japan and a monk from Thailand to teach meditation. I signed up immediately. I remember thinking, “This is a really cool skill. You sit down and breathe, and you come up an hour later a much better person.” That’s what I liked about meditation from the beginning: learning how to bring your mind under control and find happiness inside.

Did you consider yourself an unhappy person?

I think everybody in college considers themselves unhappy.



Did a light bulb go off in your head during that winter term? Did you suddenly decide, “I am becoming a monk!”

I wanted to go to Thailand with the Peace Corps. Instead, I went with the Shansi program with the idea that I would find a meditation teacher and learn a few basic skills. At the end of my Shansi term, I met Ajahn Fuang, a member of the Forest tradition, who became my teacher. I was going to extend my time in Thailand, but I caught malaria. So I disrobed and came back.

I planned to get my graduate degree in religion and teach Buddhism. I went to an American Academy of Religion conference in Chicago, where the three big names in Thai Buddhism gave presentations. About ten people showed up. And there was no dialogue going on at all. I thought, “I cannot do this with my life.” I kept thinking about Ajahn Fuang on his hillside with not much [in the way of material possessions] to his name — yet perfectly happy.

So you returned to Thailand. Did you intend to become a monk?

You really have to be a monk to have a full-time opportunity to meditate. You have whole days to yourself to work on your greed, anger, and delusions. It seemed like an ideal situation.

I stayed with Ajahn Fuang for another ten years. I became his attendant, the monk who looked after him when he was sick. Before he died in 1986, he made it known that he wanted me to take over the monastery in Thailand. There was no precedent for a Westerner taking over a temple that had been founded by and for Thai monks, so it was pretty controversial.

By the time I was offered the position of abbot there, so many strings were attached that it would have been all responsibility and no authority. It was then that Ajahn Suwat sought me out and asked me to help him here in California.

Ajahn Suwat is a Thai monk who founded a Buddhist Forest monastery in a suburb of Orange County, California.

They tried to maintain the traditions of a Forest monastery. They planted a lot of trees to make it a nice, forest-like kind of place. But the city environment had taken over. Ajahn Suwat had begun looking for a new place in a forest and had identified this spot near San Diego. A young man who had just come into an inheritance offered to buy it. Ajahn Suwat asked me, “Are you going to come help me with this? If not, I cannot accept the money, because I cannot run two monasteries at

once.” I didn’t have to think twice. I said, “Yes.”

What is a typical day like for you? It is 8:00 AM, and the alarm goes off...

I get up at 4:00 AM.

You set your alarm for 4:00 AM?!

I pretty much just wake up now. If I had a long night the night before, maybe 5:00 AM. Then, I get up and meditate for about two hours.

By yourself or with a group?

By myself.

Are there ever days when it’s difficult to drag yourself out of bed?

For me, the early morning is the best time to meditate. There is always the thought that if I do not get up and meditate now, I will miss this chance. It is still cool outside. There is an extra-quiet atmosphere.

I meditate until dawn, and then I come here [to the common area by the temple] and help sweep and clean up with the other monks.

Does a gong go off, or do you just know when it’s time to stop meditating?

I know. And I have my little beeper watch.

In Thailand, monks go for alms rounds every morning to get food, leaving the monastery and carrying a bowl into which people put food. What happens in San Diego? Do you hop in an SUV and drive through the local suburbs?

We go with our bowls to the guesthouse. People prepare food in the kitchen.

Who is there?

People who are visiting the monastery and

meditating, candidates for the monkhood. A young guy who works in the orchard is sometimes there. We also have Thai and Laotian people who come up just to present food.

You get one meal a day. Are you getting enough fiber? Are you getting enough protein?

I weigh 30 pounds more than when I graduated from Oberlin.

But don't you get hungry?

That first year in Thailand was hard, as my body was adjusting to the change in diet and metabolism. I was in a very ascetic mood, so I did not mind that I got really thin. Part of me was sick and tired of America. I wanted to go to a place with a natural, pre-modern lifestyle. Thailand was about as pre-modern as you could get.

One morning, as I was going on my alms round, it struck me that I was living a hunter-gatherer's lifestyle. We were not allowed to store food; we did not grow crops. We ate what we got that day, that is it. One hour a day is dedicated to food, and then you are free for the rest of the day.

After breakfast, what happens?

We clean up, and everyone goes back to his hut. We meet again at about 5:00 PM.

And during the day?

Mostly it is meditating. Some reading. I limit myself to two hours of writing.

There is no bed in your hut, just a mattress that you roll out every night. There is also a computer and a printer. Do you get e-mail?

No, but one of our supporters set up a web site: www.here-and-now.org/watmetta.html.

You said that people here gather together at 5:00 PM. Is that for Happy Hour?

It is a question and answer period for visitors. Then, people have free time until 8:00 PM, when we have a chanting session, which lasts about twenty minutes. Then, there is an hour of group meditation and usually a Dhamma talk.



Do you spend any of your meditation time reflecting on what you will say?

Very little. The Forest tradition places a lot of emphasis on concentration practice, getting the mind to stay with one object. So that takes up a lot of my time. And of course, if you are sitting for long periods of time, pain is going to come up. Then, the mind creates issues about the pain.

Dealing with that is the Buddha's First Noble Truth: There is pain in life; there is suffering in life. I think the reason He focused on that is that if you sit with your pains and suffering, if you have the tools of concentration and mindfulness, you start seeing these issues in your mind.

How is that different from therapy?

The purpose of therapy, Freud said, was to take neurotic individuals and return them to an ordinary level of unhappiness. The purpose of meditation is to take you from that ordinary level of unhappiness to a place where there is no unhappiness and no

suffering.

Do the people who come here bring psychological baggage with them?

The monks are a pretty self-reliant group. It is the visitors who come with deeper psychological wounds.

What kinds of questions do visitors ask you?

Oh, everything from meditation questions to relationship questions. How to deal with their kids, how to deal with their parents. How to get out of an unhealthy situation. How to maintain one's commitment in a situation that is difficult. "Should I go for that raise, or should I find more time to meditate?" I tend to say, "Take more time to meditate. You do not need that much money."

Almost thirty years ago, you embarked on a path that took you away from the mainstream. You do not commute, you do not have a 9-to-5 job, you do not have credit cards, and you do not have a family. Does the path you have taken limit your ability to deal with the problems people face?

I focus on what I can offer by being outside the rat race. During all those years in Thailand, it was healthy for me to be around people who did not have typical American neuroses. You get to see your own neuroses writ large because you are the only one in the area who has them. Until you say, "This is really dumb."

When do you go to bed?

Usually about 11:00 PM or 12:00 midnight.

You only get four or five hours of sleep?!

That is plenty. Meditation takes away a lot of the stressful need for sleep.

Do you nap?

In the late afternoon.

Many people see Buddhism as anti-pleasure: no drinking, no drugs, no debauchery. These are a few of my favorite things. Do you ever miss them?

The biggest loss for me was classical music. I was hooked on classical music. When I got stoned and listened all those years ago, that was my idea of a good time.

When I began to meditate, I would start getting into these states where I felt the same sense of rapture I got from a really good performance of classical music. I thought, "Oh my gosh, I can get this sensation just by sitting here and breathing." In the past, I had to worry about my stereo and if my records would get scratched. I needed all that stuff around just to get a pleasure fix.

Do you ever listen to classical music?

It is against the rules. When I go home, Dad has it on all the time, so I hear it then. Occasionally, Brahms or Mahler goes through my head. But it gets so that you do not miss it.

What was the last movie you saw?

I saw the first "Lord of the Rings" on a flight to Thailand, but I did not hear it. There is a rule against watching shows; you are supposed to be turning inward.

Are you allowed recreation of any sort?

For us, recreation is going out into the wilderness. [It is] sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon and meditating, opening our eyes every now and then, looking at the Grand Canyon, and meditating some more. We do a lot of walking meditation; it is really emphasized in this tradition. When I get a chance, or when I have had enough of the monastery, I go out and hike around awhile.

What else do monks do for exercise?

A lot of sweeping up. Some Western monks and modern Thai monks do yoga in their rooms.

But you cannot say, “Hey, I have meditated all day, I just want to toss around a football.”

No.

Are you allowed to read for pleasure?

You get so that you are not interested in fiction. The only fiction that I read nowadays is by my friend Jeanne Larsen [Oberlin class of 1971, the author of three historical novels set in China] and *Harry Potter*.

Why Harry Potter?

I thought the books taught good lessons about loyalty, integrity, and such things.

So Harry Potter is OK, but Robert Ludlam is not OK?

I have to use my judgment. Is what I am reading getting in the way of my meditation? If I find myself closing my eyes and seeing visions that are not helping me at all, then, it is obviously something I should be not be reading.

Do you keep up with the world?

Only in the last year or two. I get *The Nation* and *The Guardian Weekly*. I really liked all those years in Thailand when I did not get any news. For my first eight years, the only international news that came out to the monastery was “Elvis Presley has died” and “Skylab is falling.”

Did it take a long time to adjust to a celibate lifestyle?

The first hurdle you face is not wanting to take care of it, the attractiveness of lust itself. But after

a while, I began to realize that I was suffering because of this. But if I focused on the lust itself, rather than the object of the lust, I began to realize lust was not that good a thing to have in my mind.

Do you ever feel lustful?

No.

Never?

You have meditation to take care of it. As soon as lust comes into the mind, you have to take care of it.

You sound so pragmatic.

It is very pragmatic. That was one of the lessons I got from Ajahn Fuang: Get over the drama and sit down and do the work. I remember the first time he said to me, “OK, we are going to meditate all night.” I said, “My God, I cannot do that! I have been working hard all day!” He said, “Is it going to kill you?” “No.” “Then you can do it.”

What about the simple desire for touch? Can non-monks touch you?

Women cannot. With men, it depends on how they are going to touch me. No lustful touching.

Some people assume monks have transcended human feelings and never have “negative” feelings such as anger and greed. Do you ever get pissed off?

Occasionally, there are irritations. A woman I taught became convinced I was sending her subliminal messages. She thought I wanted to leave the monastery and marry her. I tried to make it clear I would not, but she kept insisting I was giving her subliminal messages. I said, “Look, you are not my student anymore. I am sorry, this is not working out.” She thought I just said that because there were other people around. So she started coming back. I must admit I was irritated. But she

finally got it.

What about the lesser frailties. Do you have any vanity? Do you ever find yourself spending too much time getting your robe to look just right?

The robe is pretty cut-and-dried. There is not much I can do about it.

Pride?

A little bit. I was editing my Dhamma talks, and every now and then I would come across a phrase and think, “that was pretty cool.”

Do you have fears?

I would hate to die before this place got established.

Do you ever have sleepless nights?

The last sleepless night I had was when one of my monks disrobed. I kept thinking, “What did I do wrong?” I thought about it lying down for a while, and then, I would get up and walk around for a while. Then, I sat down for a while.

There was a point in which I realized, “This is ridiculous. I am not getting any answers. So I might as well stop the questioning for the time being.” That is one of the skills you learn during meditation. If you are asking questions, and there are no answers coming, just stop asking. It is not time for the answer yet.

Do you ever feel guilt?

No.

Was that a difficult emotion to get rid of?

Yes, that was probably a big one. But in Thailand, there is no guilt. It is totally a shame culture (“Do not do that; it embarrasses us in front of the neighbors”), but not a guilt culture (“Do not do that; it hurts me when you do that”). Guilty

feelings started feeling really, really dumb. People function well and live perfectly normal lives without it.

Did you pick up shame as a replacement?

If I do something I really know I should not have done, then, I feel ashamed.

How do you deal with the shame when you feel it?

Ajahn Fuang taught us that we cannot just sit around and stew. The idea is: you have noticed you have made your mistake; do not repeat it. That is the best that can be asked of a human being.

Do you also believe in atoning?

You ask forgiveness of the person you’ve wronged.

In the Thai language, monks are referred to not as “people”, but as “sacred objects.” Do you view yourself as a sacred object?

No.

How do you view yourself?

As a person. Despite this weird outfit, there is a human being in here.

Are there aspects of Buddhism that are still mysteries to you?

I would like to know what full enlightenment is like.

Do you ever, ever think about disrobing?

Bea Camp [Oberlin class of 1972] came to visit me one time in Thailand. She and her husband David Summers [Oberlin class of 1971] were working for the U.S. Foreign Service in Bangkok. They filled me up with all the news of our old

mutual friends — careers that did not turn out the way people had planned, divorces, separations, disappointments. David asked me, “Have you ever regretted being a monk?” And I said, “Well, the thought never crossed my mind, and certainly not now.”

One final question. When you were in Thailand, was there a “Eureka!” moment when you thought, “I’ve got it”?

Monks cannot talk about their attainments.

What if I say “please”?

(Laughter). ■

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Playwright Rich Orloff lives in New York.

Many of Ajahn Geoff’s writings and translations are available at www.mettaforest.org. They are also available at www.accesstoinight.org.

Biographical note: Ajahn Fuang Jotiko, Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s teacher, was born in 1915 and passed away in 1986.

Observance of Morality

In Buddhism, morality (*sīla*) can be divided into four main areas of practice, referred to in the *Visuddhimagga* as the “fourfold purification.” These four areas of practice are:

1. Restraint with regard to conduct (Right Speech and Right Action) — the 227 disciplinary rules for Theravādin monks; the 331 disciplinary rules for Theravādin nuns; the ten precepts and seventy-five *sekhiya* (training rules) for novices; and the five lay or eight lifetime precepts for lay persons.

2. Restraint of the sense faculties — of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.
3. Purification of livelihood (Right Livelihood) — livelihood that accords with the teachings.
4. Reflection on (and moderation in) the use of the four requisites — food, shelter, clothing, and medicine.

These rules support a lifestyle that encourages the development of concentration (*samādhi*) and the acquisition of wisdom (*paññā*) through the observance of appropriate *sīla* for both monastics and lay persons.

When one goes on a retreat, such as those held at IMC-USA in Westminster, MD, one typically observes the eight precepts for lay persons listed below:

1. To refrain from taking life (this includes the killing of insects).
2. To refrain from taking what is not freely given.
3. To refrain from any kind of sexual activity.
4. To refrain from false speech (this includes all forms of unwholesome speech — false speech, vulgar speech, sarcasm, gossip, and idle chatter [chit-chat, small talk]).
5. To refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness (this includes all and any type of intoxicant, including, but not restricted to, alcoholic beverages and recreational drugs).
6. To refrain from eating after the midday meal.
7. To refrain from dancing, singing, music, and shows (all forms of entertainment), and from bodily adornment — the use of jewelry, perfumes, and cosmetics.
8. To refrain from the use of high and large (luxurious) seats and beds.

For novices and ten-precept nuns, rule seven becomes two separate rules; rule eight becomes rule nine; and a tenth rule is added, prohibiting the handling, use, or possession of gold and silver (in effect, all forms of money, including cash, credit cards, ATM and debit cards, checks, jewelry, and other forms of exchange). ■

Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

Membership

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship encourages sincere practitioners to become members and to become active in promoting and supporting the activities of the organization. Members receive mailings and the right to participate in programs sponsored by the organization. Members also receive free copies of all educational material produced by the organization. Though there are absolutely no dues or other fees required to become a member of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship, voluntary contributions are accepted. These donations help support the on-going activities of the organization and help cover operating expenses such as producing, printing, and mailing notices of events, cost of preparing and producing educational material, etc. ■

Membership Form:

Name: _____

Address: _____

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Return forms to: Charleston Buddhist Fellowship ♦ 940 Rutledge Avenue ♦ Charleston, SC 29403-3206

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